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A
LETTER
TO
THE EDITOR
OF
THE BRITISH CRITIC,
AND
QUARTERLY THEOLOGICAL REVIEW.



Occasioned by an Article in the Number of that Journal

FOR APRIL, 1834.

BY THE
REV. BADEN POWELL, M.A. F.R.S.
SAVILIAN PROFESSOR OF GEOMETRY, OXFORD.

OXFORD,
J. H. PARKER;
J. G. AND F. RIVINGTON, ST. PAUL'S CHURCH YARD,
AND WATERLOO PLACE, LONDON.

1834.

597.

TO
THE EDITOR
OF
THE BRITISH CRITIC,
&c.

SIR,

Finding in the last Number of your Journal an Article, which amply redeems your promise (in the former Number) of bestowing your editorial animadversions on my recent publication on Revelation and Science, &c. I am induced, for several reasons, to address to you, and the writer of that Article, a few remarks in reply.

Individually, I am bound to acknowledge the attention and courtesy shewn towards me in the critique. I have not to find fault with the writer for acrimony of language ; nor for wasting words upon insignificant details. I also cordially agree with what he observes, (in which you tacitly assent by the insertion of the Article,) as to the grave and serious importance of the subject, especially in reference to the state of opinion in the present times. As I am personally alluded to, I must be permitted utterly to disclaim all pretensions to being a

supporter of a new and peculiar school of philosophico-religious speculation ; or to " giving law" on these subjects, as seems to be insinuated. But I always claim for myself, as well as others, the most unlimited freedom of stating and defending our views in the way of fair argument. In my case, those views are directed to no visionary systems, and have certainly no kindred with the *lucus-a-non-lucendo* " rationalism" of the Germans. My aim in these momentous subjects (in which it appears to me that nothing short of the most *entire individual conviction* is of any value) is to endeavour to discover for myself, and to recommend to others, so far as they may fairly be convinced, but no further, the pure spirit and meaning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, such as by diligent study I can collect it from those sacred records, where *alone* I believe it to be contained.

This has been my endeavour in the discourse under review, and always has been, and I trust will be, whether in the University pulpit, or elsewhere : it being, to my apprehension, nothing else than the discharge of the solemn and paramount ordination obligation, to teach nothing as necessary to salvation but what "*I shall be persuaded* may be concluded and proved out of holy Scripture."

Your contributor seems to insinuate against me a recent change of opinions. This, if it were true, I could never admit as matter of censure : and that

it is utterly untrue, I could prove (were it of the slightest consequence) by unquestionable evidence of my having held the same opinions long ago.

So much, Sir, for myself personally, and for your “*metaphorical*” roasting” couched in the remark, that these views may seriously affect my character as a minister of the Church of England. Fully appreciating the *purely metaphorical* nature of this gentle insinuation, I shall yet take the liberty of saying, that the writer has not adduced one particle of evidence, beyond his own assertions and surmises, in support of it. This however, I am aware, has been always considered ample proof by “inquisitors,” among whom, I observe by direct implication, he ranks himself.

Being quite aware of the manner in which the criticisms of the Quarterly Theological are supplied, and not doubting that your contributor is some young scion of orthodoxy, (*very* young I should infer from some of his observations,) who writes for preferment, I should be extremely sorry to say any thing which even *metaphorically* could injure him. But I must, in justice to the important nature of the subject, set him and your readers right upon the main point of my argument, of which he has prudently waived the consideration.

The incompatibility of the letter of the Mosaic description of the Creation, with the actual structure of the earth, is not an opposition between *revelation*, and any *speculations, theories, or infer-*

ences, of human *reason* ; but a discordance between matters of *fact*, between *existing monuments* of past events, between the *real*, and *substantial* remains of what once must have existed in life, and the *literal* sense of a certain passage, not involving any essential doctrine of Christianity, which *must* therefore be understood in some other than the literal sense.

This, Sir, in few words, is the whole statement of the case. No matter of *theory* is concerned in it. But the distinction between what is *fact*, and what *theory*, (in many other subjects as well as this,) is, I admit, above all others, one on which confusion of ideas very commonly prevails. But let it be remembered, that the *facts* are no other than what are and were constituted so by the same Creator, who inspired the volume of revelation. And as it is the foundation of doctrinal faith, that in matters of *divine mystery* human speculation must give way to the simple word of revealed truth, so surely by the same rule, in matters of *sensible fact*, the literal interpretation of the word of God must be modified in conformity with his visible works.

A considerable portion of the remarks (which I think might have been spared) is occupied by nothing but the usual common-place tirade about the limited extent of the human faculties, and the presumption of opposing our short-sighted speculations to the truths of revelation. All this I am quite aware is the approved style of declamation ; and if (as I believe is your principle) truth depends

upon antiquity and repetition, this kind of argument will not be deficient in force. As originality is with your school equivalent to heresy, triteness is no defect. There is, however, some novelty in the illustration of "scratching the earth skin-deep." But however small may be the depth to which geology has penetrated, you will allow that even a scratch upon the skin may sometimes suffice to give abundant evidence of what is beneath. But as your contributor professedly avoids the scientific part of the question, and proceeds to call me to account for my theology, it is on that ground I am anxious to meet him ; and am prepared to maintain, that, in a theological point of view, his ideas and arguments are equally unfounded and inapplicable : often unintelligible to me, and I suspect sometimes not very clearly apprehended by himself.

The most weighty part of the censure is the charge of heresy brought against my views. And here I must make particular acknowledgments for the enlightenment you have afforded me. The observations in your Article tend so powerfully to dispel the doubts, and remove the difficulties, which have hitherto hung over the ominous question, what is heresy? that I must for a moment dwell upon them.

First, we have the dictum of Dr. Johnson, that "heresy is the opinion of private men, different from that of the catholic and orthodox Church."

I will not here stop to enquire, what then becomes of the whole system of protestantism? nor will I press the critic with the awkward enquiry, what were the doctrines of Wicliff, Luther, and others, but the opinions of private men, different from those of the catholic and orthodox Church? or who is to be the judge of catholicity and orthodoxy? But I will proceed to the application of this principle, to the views I have advocated. The formation of the crust of the earth, in a way utterly at variance with the progressive six days of the Mosaic account, is then an opinion of private men, opposed to the doctrine of the catholic and orthodox Church. Is the critic really incapable of seeing, that this statement is no *opinion* of mine or any other men, private or public, but an incontrovertible matter of fact? And were it ever so much a matter of opinion, when, I would ask, did the catholic and orthodox Church ever express an opinion opposed to it?

But the critic's own definition of heterodoxy is still better. It is that which, "first, contradicts the letter of Scripture; and, secondly, is opposed to all esteemed and authorized expounders of Scripture, whether Councils or individuals, compilers of Articles or founders of sects." I know not whether most to admire this for its perspicuity of application, or solidity of foundation. My dulness of apprehension obliges me to enquire, *What is the letter of Scripture? Who are esteemed and authorized*

expounders? *By whom* esteemed? and *how* authorized? *What is* an exposition? Is it or is it not an *addition* to Scripture? What Councils and what individuals am I to refer to? What Articles am I to appeal to? *how* and *whence* compiled? What *founders of sects* am I to consider as approved and authorized? In short, these and twenty similar questions must be settled before the definition is so much as *intelligible*.

But supposing I have *precise* answers to all these points, and that no doubt remains as to the *meaning* of the definition; still another question arises, not a little perplexing; and that too from the very nature of the case. For *how* is it determined, and *by what authority* ascertained, that all this *does* constitute orthodoxy? You can only answer, "from Scripture and approved commentators, &c. &c." That is, orthodoxy is orthodox, because it is orthodox.

All this would be truly satisfactory, did it merely refer to matters of ordinary importance. But when we reflect on the momentous nature of the truths and interests which are to depend on this curiously linked chain of authority, it becomes the more necessary to try its soundness a little further.

These all-important doctrines, then, in which nothing less than eternal salvation is wound up, are to be determined, you say, by Scripture: but not by Scripture *alone*: by Scripture as interpreted by certain commentators. Now a commentary is

an addition : a sense put upon the bare word is something added. This addition then is to be received as approved and authorized by *some* power ; whose fiat is essential to determining the true doctrines of Christianity ; and therefore makes the commentary of *equal* authority with Scripture. Such is the necessary consequence. In other words, you inevitably involve yourself in *authoritative tradition*. For there can be no difference ; if the commentary or formulary be not of *precisely equal* authority with the written record, it cannot suffice to determine an article of *divine truth*. Nothing can make a doctrine of divine authority, which is not itself invested with divine authority. It requires the very same divine authority to add a sense to a text, as to dictate the text ; that is, if that sense is to be the very formula of true doctrine.

Thus your grand principle is no other than the very same which involves in its train the whole system of Romish infallibility : the very principle *whose rejection constituted the distinguishing feature of the Reformation* ; and without which rejection, indeed, not one step which the Reformers took could be justified.

Fortunately, your adoption of all this depends, in reality, upon no other authority than *your own private judgment*. The very same ground on which I in like manner claim the right of utterly and totally rejecting it.

But were it otherwise, I have yet to learn what Creed, what Council, what approved and authorized commentator, has decreed, that the letter of the Mosaic cosmogony is to be received as an article of faith.

But apart from your contributor's notions of orthodoxy, his ideas of the application of Scripture appear to me scarcely less extraordinary. I was certainly prepared to expect, in a theological Article coming from such high authority, at least some indications of those learned and luminous views of Scripture, which the profound study of all the treasures of *approved* interpreters should supply. But though the orthodox theologian, entrenched in the strong-holds of authority, and supported by the artillery of commentators, may bear a most formidable appearance, yet when he descends into the actual field to exhibit his personal prowess, his real weakness often exposes itself. At least, such is most notably the case in the present instance.

Throughout the whole Article, nothing appears more conspicuous than a thorough absence of all real individual power on the part of the writer to wield for himself the weapons of Scripture: joined to the most dark and confused notions of the nature of inspiration, its design and purport; and the consequent distinctions in the application of different portions of the sacred writings. No where is this more evident than in his remarks on the separation

which he thinks I would put between the Old Testament and the New. The system (if such it can be called) which he upholds seems to me (as far as I understand it) very closely to resemble that of puritanism: a sort of appeal to the Bible, *as if it were all one book*, every detached sentence of which is universally and immediately applicable to all persons under all circumstances.

Such notions, prevalent as they are among the fanatical multitude, were, I own, what I was little prepared to expect in a writer in the Quarterly Theological: and still less in an upholder of Church authority as equal to the word of God.

Yet, after the approved model of that school, he quotes a detached text as his sole proof of the inspiration of the Old Testament, without any reference to the context: which teaches *for what purposes* it is inspired: a consideration the more important in the present case, as it is exactly the foundation of the distinction I have insisted on with regard to the allusions to physical facts; which have no reference to "doctrine, reproof, correction, or instruction in righteousness."

Another instance of the same confusion of ideas appears in the assertion, that there is no distinction between essential and non-essential points in Scripture. A doctrine the more remarkable, as it is contrary to the views, I believe, of all the most "approved commentators;" at least, of the Protestant Churches. Can points on which the best

commentators have differed, (even on your own principle,) be of equal authority with those on which they have agreed? *e. g.* Are the doctrines of the millennium, of an intermediate state, and of gradations of future rewards and punishments, equally essential with the atonement and the resurrection? Or, to come to a more tangible example, (presuming the writer to be a clergyman,) let me ask him, whether in visiting the sick he "anoints them with oil in the name of the Lord:" whether he abstains from "blood" and from "things strangled;" (as, *e. g.* from fowls?) If not, he admits that there are some things in Scripture which are non-essential.

By the *italics*, (p. 415.) I imagine it is insinuated, that there are no *fictions* in Scripture! no parables, no poetry, no allegory! And the critic, in accordance with this luminous idea, finds great fault with a suggestion, as to the interpretation of the opening of Genesis, which I have thrown out, (and which by the way he has totally misstated,) but in which I feel no sort of concern. The object of that conjecture was simply to smooth down any apparent harshness in the statement of the truth. Without any such conjecture, I am content to leave the matter unexplained, as deeming it of no importance. It is for you, and others who do regard it of importance, to suggest a better explanation: and I am ready to admit any which shall be *compatible* with the *facts*. But by those

facts, I am *compelled* to reject the progressive stages in six periods as *literal history*. I do *not reject* the letter of other *physical statements*, which the Reviewer, with so much triumph, retorts upon me, simply because in those cases I am *not* met by any *contradicting facts*.

A considerable portion of your Article is occupied in dilating on the connexion and analogies between the Old Testament and the New, which it is contended my views have a tendency to weaken and undermine. I am quite aware how commonly such analogies are pushed to the length of absolute identity, and such connexion drawn into actual coincidence. And if my views tend to the rejection of such close assimilation, I can only say, that this sort of speculation seems to me extravagantly overrated by most ordinary divines; and that those assimilations are too commonly carried, by the exercise of a fertile imagination, to an extent far beyond what is sanctioned by any express authorities in the New Testament; and, as appears to me, it is upon such express authorities *alone* that we ought to venture upon the application of any analogy, any type, prophecy, or other point of connexion between the Christian and previous dispensations. Nothing is easier than to trace out endless analogies of this kind, and nothing more plausible and obvious than to convert them, so framed, into substantial realities; but nothing at the same time more illusory: and nothing further

from the truth than the inference, that they were really *designed* to be so applied. Such modes of theorizing are in fact all part of a system, and it is not surprising, that those who support that system as a whole, should be proportionally vehement in their denunciations against any partial infraction of its uniformity and completeness. But it appears to me to be one of those crude and hasty generalizations, to which the human imagination is so prone; and by which it seeks to frame to itself a ready and comprehensive idea of the whole scheme (as it is termed) of the divine dispensations. Hence have arisen all the systems, however varied in their particular forms and complexions, of the Calvinistic school. Hence what is significantly enough termed Bible-religion: a sort of eclecticism from all the different dispensations recorded in the sacred history. Hence the literal application of *texts*. Hence the judaizing spirit of the puritanical school. Hence the assumption of the *universality* of precepts given to the Jews, or to the Patriarchs: the notion of the sabbath, as applying to Gentile Christians, and other like tenets widely maintained in the present times.

That my principles tend to the rejection of all these corruptions (as I consider them) of the pure spirit of the Gospel, I most readily admit and avow. And that the spirit of the religion of Jesus Christ and his Apostles is entirely opposed to them, I am firmly persuaded. It is with this very object that

I am most anxiously desirous to maintain and defend those principles : but to urge them upon *no authority* except that of *rational conviction*.

More particularly, the origin of the human race is a point on which you think my views fearfully heterodox, “ under the thin cloak of hypothesis :” in a word, they *will* be heterodox, when the origin of man from several distinct races shall be demonstratively proved : for the whole is only put hypothetically ; but this you consider equally bad. Not to dwell upon the preposterous and unheard-of injustice of charging upon an Author what he has put hypothetically, as if it were asserted dogmatically, I will merely ask, where is the point of heterodoxy? to what is even this hypothesis opposed? Not to the substantial doctrine of universal corruption, and the consequent necessity of entire regeneration by divine grace ; for that I have strenuously upheld. Not the doctrine of the Articles and Liturgy of the Church of England ; but a doctrine of your own relative to Adam, as the “ federal head” of the human race : of which I can find nothing either in the Bible or in the Articles : and which I believe exists no where but in the dogmas of the Schoolmen, and the imagination of Milton. I am not ignorant that it is a prevalent notion : but I deny that it possesses even your characteristic of Church authority ; to say nothing of Scripture proof. I am not sure that even this doctrine would really be opposed by the hypothesis in question ; which, were

it true, might, I should suppose, apply equally well to the *several* heads of the different races.

But the question is altogether placed in the region of hypothesis, since the arguments of the best physiologists are at present in favour of the common origin of the different races of men, which are shewn to be only *varieties*, and not *species*". But if evidence *absolutely demonstrative*, (which is the only case I supposed, and the only one admissible,) compelled us to believe in the origin of mankind from several different primæval stocks, I am afraid all this would not really in the least do away with the fact of the universal corruption of human nature, which I apprehend the Gospel regards rather in individuals than in their progenitors; and is happily concerned rather about the remedy, than the origin, of the disorder.

One word with regard to the practical consequences of the argument from geology. I am openly charged with putting weapons into the hands of the infidels. The charge ought (as I have said in a note) to be made not against the geologist, but against the *rocks* he has explored, *They* are the records which give the advantage to the unbeliever. And *who*, I ask, makes them do so? The answer is clear: those who insist on the *letter* of the Mosaic description.

* For a good abstract of these arguments, the reader is referred to the paper of Dr. Prichard, in the Reports of the British Association for the Promotion of Science, 1832.

In a word, the people every where are learning, and will learn, Geology. The first rudiments of the science bring them to successions of primæval æras totally different from the six days (whether natural days or longer periods) of the Book of Genesis. Next comes the emissary of infidelity. He points out the contradictions: the hearers cannot deny it: *therefore* he says you must reject the *whole* Bible and the whole of Christianity. But why? *Because your own religious teachers, and the orthodox writers in the Quarterly Theological tell you,* that you must not separate one portion of Scripture from another—that there is no distinction between the truths of the Gospel and the descriptive language of Genesis!

I have here put the case only as regards the lower classes, and the attempts of the actual infidel. But, Sir, neither you nor your contributor can be ignorant, that, widely as the case I have supposed applies, it is not to be taken as a representation of the whole extent to which similar causes are operating. Without any disposition to listen to the open scoffs of the undisguised emissary of unbelief, and with acquirements and tastes above those of the class who would be influenced by such teaching, the great body of the educated community are advancing both in that general illumination and intellectual cultivation, which will not allow them to rest their faith on weak and insufficient proofs; as well as in the more particular knowledge of the

physical facts regarding the structure of the earth, which shews them the fallacy of a blind reliance on the mere letter of the Mosaic description of the creation. It is time, therefore, for the ministers of the Gospel, if they are desirous to maintain its ascendancy, to be careful not to inflict that deepest of injuries on a good cause, which results from propping it up by weak and fallacious arguments. It is time for them to have their eyes open to what is passing around them ; and instead of blindly opposing the conclusions which every educated person is now able to draw from the visible works of the Creator, and to which the real meaning of his word cannot be opposed, rather to take their stand boldly on the vantage ground of *facts*, and thus at once fortify their own position, and exclude the adversary from the advantage he would most certainly obtain in the occupation of it. On that firm ground they may not only securely defy the enemies of divine truth, but may most efficaciously support its cause and extend its dominion. The sublime doctrines of Christianity are adapted as well to the most enlightened as to the most ignorant age. The spirit of the present times and the spread of knowledge will successfully oppose themselves to the inculcation of religion only, when it is mixed up with the heterogeneous elements of prejudice and error. Let its ministers, then, boldly throw off those impediments, and evince the force of undisguised truth. Such, at least, is the course

which I, for one, am anxious to pursue. And by such a course I am perfectly convinced, that however human systems of orthodoxy may be endangered, yet the real spirit of Christianity must infallibly gain strength and prevail.

It would be useless to prolong this discussion ; and I believe I have sufficiently referred to the main topics of the Reviewer's argument. I will merely say, in conclusion, that though, in the *Quarterly Theological*, I did not look for science, I did look for theology. I did expect a writer, who could distinguish fact from theory ; the use and authority of the Old Testament from that of the New ; human opinion from divine truth ; and the fundamental principle of Protestantism from that of Popery.

Oxford, April 21, 1834.

